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What Did They Have to Say? Employees Perceptions of Customer Service

by

Louis J. Gagliano

A project submitted to the
Faculty of the School of Food, Hotel and Travel Management at the
Rochester Institute of Technology
in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree
Master of Science

November 1994

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
School of Food, Hotel and Travel Management
Department of Graduate Studies

M.S. Hospitality-Tourism Management
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M.S. Hospitality-Tourism Management
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ABSTRACT

What Did They Have to Say?

Employees Perceptions of Customer Service

by

Louis J. Gagliano

Improving customer service through employee information is a process that needs a starting point, which this project has produced. The purpose for the study is to provide employees with the opportunity to offer their ideas and perceptions. This would help a property improve its external customer service.

Through employee focus groups, the Lodge at Woodcliff in Rochester, NY identified service gap factors that exist in the resort. This project initiates the opening of the internal information resource in a local resort, and a research structure that can be utilized in future studies.

A description of the focus group design and research design is mentioned in this study. The research has been designed to allow future studies to replicate this one in this and other service areas. General information from this study was used for the purpose of identifying certain service gaps.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

John Peters is a guest staying at the Mountain Resort. He orders room service at 9:00 PM. He then calls room service twice, to find out where his dinner is since it is almost 9:45 PM. Once his dinner arrives at 10:00 PM, he is so angry and hungry that he yells at the server "I do not understand! How difficult can it be to grill some chicken, and make a bowl of soup!'" The guest asks the server to leave.

The server knows that the problem was not that the guest's dinner was not ready on time, but since he was also busy serving in the dining room, he could not get the guest's meal up to his room. The server thinks to himself "I know that I could have delivered that meal on time, if only there was a way that I could tell someone my idea."

This fictitious scenario may represent what is occurring in many small independent resorts, hotels and restaurants in the hospitality industry. An understanding of the work processes that hinder guest satisfaction or create service gaps in a resort may provide valuable information to management. If work process improvements can better serve the external customer, it could result in a higher level of customer satisfaction.

The balancing of customer expectations and perceptions will help to improve and lessen the gaps in the service delivered. One method for measuring service quality and "service gaps" was developed by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1990) named SERVQUAL (service quality). This instrument outlines customers aspects used to judge service quality.

The focus of SERVQUAL has elicited its research from the external customers perspective. This project will use one aspect of this method and use the internal customers to gather service quality data. The use of internal customers (employees) to gather data is practical since they know both the customers' opinions and the internal work processes. This is further explained in the Background section of Chapter I.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The management of an independent western New York resort property (The Lodge at Woodcliff, Rochester, NY) would like to improve service through discovering what employee's beliefs are about customer service because. These service beliefs subsequently form the service delivery process.

BACKGROUND

The ability for a business to build from its past to improve its present and future service comes from the discovery of the relationships that exist between the internal and external customer. Capitalization of these internal customers beliefs could prove beneficial to service delivery. For instance,

when a customer comes to a manager and compliments an employee's work, management can then learn what work process the employee utilized in order to deliver the level of service that the guest desired if the management is not directly asking the customer for input. Management in an operation desires the internal customers opinions of the service delivery process, which in this example is gather through the use of a focus group so that service issues (gaps) can be rectified to better serve the external customer.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this project is to discover how internal customers think they can improve customer satisfaction at the Lodge at Woodcliff. The service delivery depends on the service provider on imperative scale. SERVQUAL has identified the difference between perceptions and expectations as service gaps. The four service gaps are:

Gap 1: Customers' Expectations - Management-Perception Gap

Gap 2: Management's perceptions - Service Quality Specifications Gap

Gap 3: Service-Quality Specifications - Service Delivery Gap

Gap 4: Service Delivery - External Communications Gap

This project will discover the existence of Gap 3: The Service Performance Gap by means of two focus groups with The Lodge at Woodcliff employees. Subsequently management can utilize focus groups and the information gathered to rework the processes of: training, policy/procedures and analyze the gaps between the service provider and receiver (Byers & Wilcox, 1991).

A business that places a high value on the ideas and suggestions of its employees understands the importance they have on the service delivery process. When employees can see their role in the business, and their impact on the external customers, they will gain a greater sense of their importance in the overall operations, service, and success of a business.

The insight employees offer a business about its service can be used to improve all work processes by identifying service inadequacies. Since management has been informed on how the processes are working for the employees, (in this study through focus groups) further measures can then be taken by management to remediate a process that is not meeting customer's expectations.

SIGNIFICANCE

This project will demonstrate the ability of an operation to utilize its internal customers to improve external customer service and subsequently improve the relationships that occur between the two. The information provided by the internal customers and their contact with the external customers, will demonstrate areas where some process improvements can be utilized.

METHODOLOGY

This project will create a focus groups session for The Lodge at Woodcliff in accordance with guidelines traditionally followed in the marketing research field. There will be two preliminary "practice" focus groups before the actual focus groups are held; one with a group of graduate students and the other with the General Manager of resort. The actual focus groups will consist of two groups of resort employees from the same resort.

For these focus groups, some requirements were made to ensure the reliability of the data (Byers and Wilcox, 1991). These employees from the Lodge at Woodcliff are asked to have more than three months employment at the property. The employees will be asked to volunteer their time to participate in one of the two focus groups, but they were also paid their normal wages and an incentive. These sessions will be audio taped to ensure accuracy in the information.

The standardized focus group session will decrease anxiety through an extensive explanation before the session (Morgan, 1988; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). The subjects covered to decrease anxiety are the confidentiality and objectives of the sessions. The decrease in anxiety will help to increase the effectiveness of the sessions as suggested by Stewart and Shamdasani (1990). The gathering of the focus group information will ensure that the session is designed through best "in practice" uses from various focus group authors.

The use of the "open-ended" or "less- structured" question technique will allow the focus group participants to offer their opinions in an open structure (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). After the session's objectives have been explained, an example of an open-ended question may be, "When you think of customer service, what work processes do you feel need to be improved to provide better customer service?" This type of question allows the participant to respond without restrictions such as the moderators or questioning bias.

HYPOTHESIS

This study will demonstrates how employee in a resort cannot identify SERVQUAL's Service Performance Gap Factor of Role Conflict as the biggest gap.

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

EXTERNAL CUSTOMER:

A person who comes from outside the business in search of the services provided by the organization.

(Ciampa, 1992)

FOCUS GROUP: A small group of people brought together to be interviewed by a moderator, to obtain information through group discussion (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1990).

INDEPENDENT RESORT PROPERTY:

Adopted from Chuck Gee's (1990) definition of a resort property, it is a property that has 150-200 guest rooms and more amenities than a hotel, such as a pool, sport center, tennis courts, and possible golf course. The property is owned by one person or a small group of persons with no affiliation to another hotel or chain.

(Gee, 1988)

INTERNAL CUSTOMER:

A person who works in an organization to serve an external customer and one who serves or is served by another person within an organization. (Ciampa, 1992)

MODERATOR: The person who focuses topic discussions and keeps the group towards achieving its objectives

(Morgan, 1988).

ASSUMPTIONS

IDEOLOGICAL:

This study will gather information from two focus group sessions. The information provided by the internal customer will identify what work processes result in poor service quality which may be hindering an increase in customer satisfaction. The criteria set for participants will be that they volunteer to participate in the focus group, worked twenty-five hours or more a week and they have been at the resort for three months or longer.

This allows a working knowledge of the work processes and internal/external customer relationship to be discussed with full knowledge and insight.

PROCEDURAL:

The selection of the focus group participants is on a volunteer basis. Specifically, the general manager of the resort posted a "sign-up" sheet with a copy of the projects proposal attached. From the researcher's perspective, the stronger the internal desire to participate in a focus group, the more information would then be gathered.

The participants of the group will be aware of the objectives of the focus groups to ensure that the objectives will be met without inhibiting the participants comments. This will ensure that the participants have the desire to discuss openly their opinions of how to increase service to customers through the awareness of the sessions objectives. The information provided by the two sessions will be written in a detailed report with the intention that management will act upon the information provided.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

This study will only be used to gather data involving the internal customer and identifying Zeithaml, et al., (1990) Gap 3: The Service Performance Gap . Previous research in the applications of SERVQUAL to identify service gaps has utilized surveys to gather this information. The limitation of this study will be that it will identify Gap 3 through the use of focus groups.

Through the literature review information of focus groups and their design, a workable focus group session will be designed. The exploration of adaptations of SERVQUAL studies will not be explored due to the nature of this specific study. Data on financial limitations, management implementation of the data provided from the focus groups and results of the data on customer service are not the major emphasis in this study, but should be examined in other studies.

PROCEDURES:

The population of this study will be around eight to twelve participants which is an appropriate number of participants for focus groups (Byers and Wilcox, 65). The focus groups will be conducted in an independent resort property in western New York. Two focus group sessions will be conducted and the information of those sessions will be compiled in a report as per the request of the property's management.

The independent variable is the internal customer as an information resource. The dependent variable is the work processes exposed that ultimately hinder customer satisfaction. The intervening variable is the resort's desire to use the information from the focus group sessions to increase customer satisfaction.

LONG RANGE CONSEQUENCES

Should the information from the focus groups be used in accordance to the hypothesis, the suggested focus group guideline may be employed in other properties.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The involvement of employees in a quality service process may aid a business in improving its service to its customers. Identifying service gaps from employees may help to improve service to the customers. An employee participation program demonstrates to management the role of the employee in operations and service delivery. The understanding of this process is broken down into three areas to encompass all of these areas within the literature review. They are as follows:

- **Participative Management and Service Improvements-** Work improvements through the creation of an environment which promotes employee involvement in the decision making and problem solving process (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990).
- **SERVQUAL-** A customer perception measuring instrument to evaluate a business/ industries service quality (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990).
- **Focus Groups-** A research tool which gathers information from discussions among group members (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

Service improvements develop from the use of information provided by management, customers, employees, and market research companies among others sources. An instrument required to gather this information from any of these sources in order to produce what is being requested. In general, the means to gather this information once the research instrument

has been selected also needs to be decided, which for this study is through the use of a focus group. This is the outline used in this literature review, which is broken down into three areas.

The first area presented provides background information on the use of employees in a business, as related to Participative Management. The second area examines an instrument for measuring customer satisfaction: SERVQUAL and identifies Gap 3: The Service Performance Gap (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). The third area presents focus groups as a tool used to gather this information.

Participative Management and Service Improvements

In order for employees to provide any type of information or opinion to a business the environment to do so must be present and active. Management and employees need to have an understanding of this participative management style and their involvement or roles defined as discussed further in this literature review. This management approach views the value of employees as a necessary and instrumental step in implementing and carrying out any program that needs to be more efficient and effective.

Cangemi, Kowalski and Claypool (1985), explore the theory of participative management, its role and effect on an organization, and its employees. They provide ten points clarify the underlying principles of participative management:

1. Participative management involves employees in the decision making process but they do not make the final decision.
2. Participative management creates an environment where employees know that their ideas are important and valued by their superiors and will effect the superiors decisions.
3. Under a participative management style of leadership, management ultimately makes the decision which employees may reject.
4. Participative management suggest to employees that:
 - a. decisions are made after having input from the employees; or
 - b. employee suggestions are sought to find the best way to implement the decision.
5. Participative management offers the positive reinforcement needed to help reduce a resistance to change.
6. Participative management is a growing process for all that are involved which takes some time to be in optimal practice.
7. Participative management rests on the philosophy that people are strongly good, positive, and trustworthy.
8. There are other management styles which exist but this style offers personal growth and development. This creates a strong relationship between management and employees.
9. Consensus management works well in small groups where employees can be involved throughout the decision making process.
10. Quality circles, a practice of participative management offers employees the best opportunity to participate in a company's decision/improvement making process.

(Cangemi, Kowalski and Claypool, 1985)

From the above information, management and employees can understand each others role in the introduction of participative management

principles. This study will involve employees in the information/identifying process, both parties need to understand the goal of the other person in this process as presented by the above points of Cangemi, et al. (1985).

If management is willing to involve employees in the decision making process the emphasizes to employees their importance of themselves and also to the customer. When an employee's opinion has resulted in an improvement to a service delivery process those opinions will directly or indirectly affects the customer. In order for the company to implement such a program, several issues must be resolved

Cook (1992) describes how participative management brings about positive results for both management and employees, which then carries over to benefit the customer. In order for employees to be involved in this process, several issues must be examined. They are as follows:

1. Management commitment, from all managers.
2. Definable work and process, broken into specific units and responsibility.
3. Measurable outcome, by definitive quality control measures.

Service improvements cannot be a fade or on an as need basis as suggested by Cook's (1992) points. It is underlined by constant commitment. Management's commitment to improving customer service must be reinforced and ongoing from all those involved with no exceptions. The commitment link missing will be noticed and will affect other departments and individuals attempting to improve the service. Management's example

reinforces the drive to improve service in a business. In a hotel, for example, employees often view and reproduce examples set by their superiors, i.e.. management.

Employees' view of management's commitment, therefore, will reinforce the quest to improve service. Once management's commitment is reinforced, defining the work and process by units and responsibility provides the model used for improvements. If a process is not understood, the improvement of that process will take longer. Without knowing what to measure, measurement will exist without a purpose.

Management must address the issues mentioned above to ensure that employee involvement can continue to grow. Through the participative management style in a hotel, management will gain an understanding of employee's perceptions, new ideas and possible information on service improvements. Gathering information from the employees emphasizes management's recognition "that they (employees) are the closest people to the process and tend to have good ideas on how to improve the process" (Cook, 1992).

Both management and employee's understanding and commitment of these characteristics and effects of this participative style can lead to an improvement program to complete their objectives. Employees can offer their opinions to improve the problem or situation and then management can evaluate their opinions and take action. This process will be more difficult to implement if both parties do not understand their role and purpose in a participative program.

In the quest to improve service in an organizations, many programs have been suggested. From the current literature on service, the definition of service has yet to be universally defined. However, the underlying factor of the literature suggests that the evaluation of performance and delivery of service is at the discretion of the customer. The customer evaluates the service in terms of their past, present and future service expectations. The role of the service delivery person will be to evaluate the service that is expected by the customers. The delivery of the service can then be carried out at the expected level, which needs to be determined.

The service provider's role is critical in the service delivery process. Management can design and communicate all of the best plans to deliver the service as the customer expects, however, it is the service provider who will deliver the service. Therefore the employees participative role should include a type of feedback process, in which can be through the use of a focus group.

The employees role is most important in an organization since they view the various facets of their business including both the internal workings of a business and the delivery of the service provided to each customer. Therefore, they are in the best position to evaluate the service delivery process from the expectations placed on the service provider and its delivery to the customer.

The evaluation of the service quality is based on a comparison of expectations before the service delivery until the service is evaluated by the

customer after it is delivered. For the manufacturing sector, the product received is the end result. The customer evaluates the product in terms of its tangible attributes. In the service sector, the product is intangible. The service exist before during and after the customer is at the point of sale. The service involves all aspects of the purchasing experience that the customer and only the customer can evaluate.

The involvement of the service provider in the delivery and evaluation of the service is imperative. There can be no substitute or refund for the delivery of service once it is delivered to the individual customer. The service delivery must be designed to meet the customer's expectations before the actual delivery. Due to the intangible nature of a service, once it is delivered it cannot be refunded.

Delivering the desired service is imperative to meeting customer expectations, which should be the goal of a service oriented organization. Using the employees to further understand the desired service level of the customers will enable the management to improve the existing operations as to reach that desired level.

Customer service begins and ends with the customer's assessment (Zemke, 1989). However, the employees can evaluate the service delivery process to ensure that the customers assessment of the service attains the desired level. The evaluation of the service delivery will determine its actual level. The actions needed to understand the customer's perception of service must be present in the business environment. Using a business' employees is one medium to understand that environment.

Management's commitment to producing service outcomes as expected by the customer is necessary to continually aim to reach those service outcomes. Management's commitment must be communicated to employees to ensure their commitment in this aim. "The ultimate success or failure of those critical, person-to-person transactions reflects an organization's success or failure when it comes to hiring good people, training them thoroughly, and managing them in a way that encourages them to 'do what needs to be done' for customers." (Zemke, 1989). Providing employees with the necessary tools to perform the service expected by the customer will help to ensure that it is delivered as expected is a result of the communication of the management's commitment. If the tools to perform are present while management's commitment is not, the result will be a poor service delivery.

Measuring of a service's performance is a determining factor to measuring customer satisfaction. Business's who perform the service as expected by the customer will meet customer expectations. Measuring customer satisfaction should be performed by measuring that service in various ways which should reflect a business' own service strategy. (Zemke, 1989). One tool of measuring service performance is through SERVQUAL. (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, and Berry, 1990).

SERVQUAL

To evaluate the service quality of a business a measurement tool must be constructed to continually monitor its service quality. Zeithaml, et al.

(1990) have defined the essence of service from the customer' perception, this has been termed, SERVQUAL. The customer's perspective provides information necessary to a business which can then be used to continually address service issues and quality.

SERVQUAL was originally designed to measure service quality insights in various industries. The instrument was then developed through customer surveys for measuring customer' perceptions of service quality in five different service sectors: product repair and maintenance, retail banking, long-distance telephone, securities brokerage, and credit cards . From the research, five service dimension were identified: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. (Ziethaml et. al., 1990). These dimensions define the elements that are most critical to the delivery of that service.

From the SERVQUAL research, the service reliability dimension was identified as being the most critical to the customer in service delivery. The service delivery depends on the service provider on imperative scale. SERVQUAL has identified the difference between perceptions and expectations as service gaps. The four service gaps are:

Gap 1: Customers' Expectations - Management-Perception Gap

Gap 2: Management's perceptions - Service Quality Specifications Gap

Gap 3: Service-Quality Specifications - Service Delivery Gap

Gap 4: Service Delivery - External Communications Gap

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors of Gap 3: Service Quality Specifications - Service Delivery Gap. Gap 3 is also known as "The Service Performance Gap." The service performance gap is defined by situations in which employees are unable and/or unwilling to perform the service at the desired level (Zeithamal, et al., 1990). Each employee in a hotel has to balance the perceived service and the expected service of the customers, which can produce gaps if some factors are not addressed. The employee is in a position where factors such as training, attitude and experience can effect the outcome of the service. If the management's commitment to service delivery encompasses these issues, the service gap factors can be lessened. Thus, the performance can be delivered as expected by the customer. This reflects the most important dimension of SERVQUAL; reliability of the service delivery.

Providing the service desired by the customer places the employee in a position of assessing the desired service of the customer and attempting to deliver that service. The role of the employee is vital to delivering of quality service as requested by each individual customer. There are seven factors that identify possible service gaps as a result of the service provider. They are the following:

1. Role Ambiguity: Situations which exist when management does not explain their exceptions to the employees. This can result from a lack of training or continual information and feedback from management.
2. Role Conflict: When employees feel that they are not sure of the manner in which to serve the demands of the internal and external customers. Employees may not know their authority in which they can serve their customers.

3. Employee - Job Fit: The match between an employee's knowledge, experience and job. If an employee is put into a job that matches his/her right personal characteristics, the employee will be able to better perform.
 4. Technology - Job Fit: The match of technology employees use to perform their jobs. The use of technology that employees know how to use to better service their customers.
 5. Supervisory Control Systems: A proper employee evaluation and reward system that positively impacts an employees development and personal improvement.
 6. Perceived Control: The level of authority that employees feel they have to serve the customers and handle customer/ operational problems. The level of information and training provided to the employees will impact the quality of service.
 7. Teamwork: The level of collaboration existing to perform a task. Individuals and departments must understand their common goal and come together to achieve that goal.
- (Zeithemal, et al., 1990)

The above factors helped in developing further questions needed for this study. These questions identify service performance gaps using employees in a resort hotel. Through this information, focus group questions will be developed to identify the possible factors of the service performance gap. For example, identifying the existence of the teamwork factor would begin by designing a question that is do not ask if teamwork does or does not exit. Rather, the question will be worded for the employees to evaluate the service quality. This will offer the employees the opportunity to speak about any issues that they feel affect service quality such as teamwork. The development of these questions will be further discussed in Chapter III: Methodology.

The SERVQUAL tool has identified role conflict as the Gap 3 factor with the biggest gap. This demonstrates that the duties of employees are inconsistent or too demanding. (Ziethamal et. al., 1990). Does this suggest that employees are not being trained, or are guided in a direction that is clear to their meeting a customer's expectation and in total does Gap 3 exist at this property? This will be a question that this research will attempt to confirm or deny.

Without the involvement of employees, identifying service performance gaps from the employees point of view would not be possible. Participative management, as suggested in this literature reviews, provides the environment for such service improvements to commence.

The identification of the Gap 3 factors will accomplished using focus groups. This research tool provides the flexibility of developing questions to identify the service - performance gap factors. A focus group also allows the employees of a resort the opportunity to participate in this process.

Focus Groups

The use of focus groups to identify the service performance factors provides employees with the opportunity to participate in a service improvement process. The opportunities and limitations of this research tool are provided to provide the application of this research tool to this research project.

From social sciences to marketing research, focus groups have been used and adapted to provide information in various industries and settings. They were initially developed to explore issues in communication research and propaganda analysis in World War II. The tool was further developed to analyze responses to particular pamphlets, radio programs and motion pictures; which later developed into a standardized form (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1990).

Focus groups were first used in interpreting statistical effects of mass communication. They are as good exploratory tools as are other qualitative methods (Morgan, 1988; Merton, et al., 1990). The initial information gathering process can identify the scope and range of information that is involved in a study. Through the design of the focus group questions, this initial process can identify the variety of answers and direction in which further research should proceed. The focus group data will direct the researcher in identifying characteristics, which were unknown before the use of this tool. This study's hotel application meets this purpose because this is the first attempt to gather information in which to identify service gaps.

An understanding of the advantages of focus groups is provided to reinforce the application of this tool to meet this study's purpose. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) have outlined seven advantage points of focus groups:

1. A focus group offers a quick and less costly means of gathering data.
2. Focus groups creates and interactive environment for all the people involved in the sessions.

3. The focus group format gives the participants the opportunity to answer questions in their own words with information that supports their responses.
4. The focus group environment creates an environment for the respondents where they can use other respondents information to build on their individual ideas.
5. Focus groups can be developed to fit the research's objective and goal.
6. Focus groups can gather information from sources where people are illiterate.

(Shamdasani et.al., 1990; Byers et al., 1991; Morgan, 1988)

The advantages of focus groups can provide a researcher or decision maker with the benefits of this research method. This tool meets the needs of this study along with the requirements of the researcher and client of this study. As to the gathering of information in the Service Performance Gap from employees, advantage number 3 above reinforces the opportunity that this tool provides to meet this study's objective. From the focus group data, employees in a resort can identify service performance gaps factors that they view as hindering the service delivery process.

The focus group tool provides the opportunity to meet this study's objective, but for a complete understanding, the disadvantages (limitations) of focus groups should also be stated and acknowledged.

Both Shamdasani, et al. (1990) and Byers, et al. (1991) provide similar points to describe the disadvantages of focus groups. These five points are:

1. The nature of the focus groups and its dynamics limits the generalizability of the study to a larger population.

2. The group dynamics can influence the participants decisions and opinions.
3. The speed of feedback can influence the decision makers conceptualization of the information originally sought.
4. The construction of the questions and variability of responses poses as a difficulty when measuring the results.
5. Through the moderators body language and verbal queues a bias may result in the respondents answers.
(Shamdasani et. al, 1990; Byers et al., 1991)

Disadvantage number one must be understood so as not to generalize this study's information, while still meeting the needs of the researcher and client. For the researcher the other disadvantages must be addressed or acknowledged in the development of this research tool and the protocol sheet, which will provide an outline for the session, and during the session itself, it limits the possibility of bias.

Summary

Current literature points to employee participation as an essential element of any business program. Without the employee's cooperation and collaboration, ideas, programs, motivation and organizational change will be more difficult to implement. In many industries and businesses the employee has been an overlooked, and in many instances been a disregarded resource. Participative management has emphasized many facts that support the positive effects of the employees role in improving operations and now service delivery.

In order to find the Service Performance Gap factors, employees have been identified as one resource that could be utilized to provide valuable data in identifying the factors that exist in this sample resort property. Identification of this information can come about through the focus group Methodology which will be explained further in the next section.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The use of focus groups in this study provides an information gathering and reporting instrument that will meet the objectives of this study while being insightful and timely (Morgan, 1988). The exploration of this research method from the literature review supports the research objectives that would prove to be insightful and timely for the client, researcher and research.

Since this is an initial study, specific employee service information was unknown. Focus groups provide the medium to gather undefined general information (Greenbaum, 1993; Morgan, 1988). This research method will gather first time information that can then be examined and further used to improve the service performance gap and initiate future research. Thus the general information can be gathered, examined and utilized for this research and for the client.

Focus Group Sample

The population for the research were current employee from The

Lodge at Woodcliff, Rochester NY. The participation of the employees for the focus group was on a volunteer basis, but they were also paid their normal wages for their time spent in the focus group.

Two focus groups were conducted. The first group consisted of nine participants, who have worked at the resort with a range of experience of slightly less than one year to seven years. The second group consisted of seven people, who have worked at the resort from nine months to six and one-half years. A focus group should have around eight to twelve participants, which this study has attempted to maintain (Byers and Wilcox, 1991).

Focus Group Protocol

The focus group protocol sheet (Figure 1), outlines what and how information is explained by the moderator. Along with the protocol sheet, questions were formatted after RIT's project with the Landmark Society's restaurant group (Marecki, 1993). The Landmark Society is a restaurant group in Rochester, NY that has used focus groups to understand the service perceptions of external customers. This format provided the researcher with a guideline for setting up the focus group protocol for this project.

The protocol was explained to the participants before the session started. It was designed to explain the intent of this study, how the session would be conducted, decrease anxiety and reduce "groupthink" (Morgan, 1988). Providing the participants this information lessened the mystery of the session and its purpose while reinforcing the objectivity of the researcher.

The researcher explained to the focus group participants that no names would be revealed in any report or manner. Since audio tapes were used to gather comments, a release form was provided so the participants acknowledged their use. At the time, the researcher understood that in New York State, a release form must be presented and signed by the person who is being recorded to acknowledge their consent.

Figure 1

THE LODGE AT WOODCLIFF

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Date: _____ Start Time: _____ End Time: _____

Hello, everyone. My name is Louis Gagliano and this is my colleague, _____. Thank you all very much for making time to be with us today. Our discussion will be informal, so feel free to relax and ask any questions or make any comments you would like. Would you please read the following "RELEASE FORM," sign and date it and pass it to me.

Before we begin, I would like to restate the objectives of this session. This focus group will gather information on what you think you can do to improve customer service by looking at the work that you do and to gather information on your perceptions of that service.

I would like to lay down some ground rules that may help to improve the effectiveness of this session. The information that you will be providing to me will be confidential as to who said what, no names will be revealed as for the report I will provide to management. Do speak up and let's try to have just one person speak at a time, but do not feel that you cannot question another person's answer after they have finished speaking. Please say exactly what you think. Don't worry about what I think or what your neighbors think. I may interrupt you if I find that we are getting "off-track" with our train of thought, since time is limited. I would like to start by asking some general questions.

The "Ideal" Customer Service Scenario

The "Ideal" Customer Service Scenario (Figure 2) was developed by the client for this study as to define an example of the level of service and to start a dialogue of the service a guest should experience from the employees at this resort. This scenario was passed out to the focus group participants during the session. It intended to capture the employees perspective as a customer at this resort while identifying further Gap 3 factors.

Figure 2

The "Ideal" Customer Service Scenario

You are the guest. You call for a reservation at Woodcliff. The telephone is answered in a timely manner (less than three rings). The call is not transferred. The delivery of the job to gather and deliver information is professional and accurate. The spelling of your name is correct, the rate is quoted, recorded and accurate. Any anticipated needs you have are requested, recorded and given to the appropriate department. Any type of information including driving directions is provided and sent to you.

As you drive up to the entrance to Woodcliff Drive, you see a well lit sign and a well manicured lawn that is litter free.

As you pull up to the front of the hotel, you see a properly attired bell/door person with good posture awaiting their arrival. The bell person makes good eye contact, smiles, and welcomes you to the hotel. You are asked if you would like your car valet parked. Your bags are taken out of your car/van and carried to the front desk.

You are properly greeted by the front desk person. Your information, requests and rate are accurate. You are given any requested information, services, directions and community information. You are wished a pleasant stay and there is a bell person who takes your bags up to your room.

You enter the room to have your garment bags hung in the closet, and your luggage is placed on the luggage holder by the bell person. The curtains are opened, lights on and the room temperature is adjusted if needed. You see a well kept room, free of stains, nicks or scratches. The instruments in the room are explained to you, i.e. television, air conditioning, etc. You are wished a pleasant stay.

Throughout your stay when you come in contact with any employee of Woodcliff, they have good eye-contact, in uniform and are addressed properly. Any call or request is answered properly. At the end of the wake-up call request, you are wished a good night.

At check out, your bags are brought down to the lobby by a bell person. Any questions about your stay or bill are answered quickly. You are wished a pleasant trip. Your car is brought to the main entrance, bags placed in the trunk and you are again wished a pleasant trip.

Focus Group Questions

The ten focus group questions (Figure 3) were designed by the researcher from the requirements of the client. The researcher designed the questions to obtain information but without predisposed answers in mind. This would expel any concerns of producing or allowing the occurrence of a "halo-effect." Since misleading body language has an impact on responses, a conscious effort was made by the researcher to obtain from limiting gestures (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). This allowed the respondents to answer open-ended questions without prompting or leading the respondents toward a particular answer.

The use of the open-ended/ unstructured question technique allows the respondents to answer the questions in the manner in which they interpret the question. It does not fix any attention on any specific of the stimulus situation and response (Merton et al., 1990). This allows the moderator to be neutral to any judgment of the answers in relation to the focus on answering the present question.

The focus group questions were designed to identify the possible factors that exist in Gap 3: The Service - Performance Gap. The first two questions are general to "warm up" the group. The following questions underline the seven factors of this service gap by Zeithemal, et al. (1990), as described in Chapter II. Figure 3 categorizes these factors as to provide information at the discretion of the focus group participants. This process will identify any service gap factors that exist in this realm from the employees' perspective.

Figure 3

The Lodge at Woodcliff *Focus Group Questions*

General Questions to "warm-up" participants

1. Can everyone please introduce themselves, state your job position, how long you have been here and explain what you do here?
2. When you think of customer service, what comes to mind? Who are your customers?

Teamwork

3. As an employee of Woodcliff, what is your perception of the overall quality of service? Why?

Role Conflict

4. Does the service that is expected of you to deliver, match that of the service demanded by the customer?

Role Ambiguity, Employee-Job Fit, and Supervisory Control Systems

5. What do you feel is management's role in reinforcing the customer service philosophy at Woodcliff?

Perceived Control and Teamwork

6. Having read the "ideal Service Scenario," is this the "ideal" service? What suggestions do you have that will help you deliver the "ideal" service to the customers here at Woodcliff?

Role Conflict

7. Where do you think you are now at delivering the "ideal" service to the guest?

Perceived Control

8. What do you think is needed that would help you deliver the ideal service to the customer? What would make you a better service agent at Woodcliff?

Role Conflict and Technology-Job Fit

9. What would be an example of the ideal service that is demanded by the customer, but is not being addressed?

Supervisory Control Systems

10. What would make you feel more comfortable in performing your jobs?

Pre-Focus Group Sessions

Two "practice" focus group meetings were conducted. The first meeting was with the client, the other was with three graduates students from RIT's School of Food, Hotel and Travel Management program. A "run-through" of the protocol and questions enabled the researcher to discover any faults or gaps in the procedure and process. Both sessions concluded that the protocol and questions are accurate to meet the objectives of the study, while being clear and conducive for gathering the information desired.

Focus Group Procedure

After the two pre-focus group session were conducted the two focus group sessions with the employees of the resort were conducted on July 12, 1994. The sessions were in one of the resort's meeting rooms, with no observers present. The sessions were scheduled in two-hour blocks. Before the sessions commenced, the participants signed a release form so the session could be audio tapped (Figure 4). The focus group questions were written on flip charts, exactly as it appeared in print; thus, consistency was assured. There was a focus group assistant who wrote down key words to the questions on the flip charts, which was then used as a guideline in the Focus Group Findings Report.

Figure 4

RELEASE FORM

I understand that the focus group in which I am participating is being audio taped. I give permission to Louis Gagliano from Rochester Institute of Technology's School of Food, Hotel and Travel Management to use my voice for research purposes. I understand that I shall not be identified by name in any report and that this audio tape will not be used for any other purpose and will be erased within three weeks.

Signed_____

Date_____

The sessions roughly began at twenty past the hour to allow for any late-comers. A "session in progress" sign was posted on the meeting room's door, so there would be no disturbances once the sessions had commenced. Each of the sessions lasted for a total of one hour and thirty-five minutes, which was a sufficient amount of time for the respondents to answer all of the focus group questions.

As requested by the client, a cash incentive was given to one of the participants. The vote was by a show of hands of the group member whom was most vocal. None of the participants had prior knowledge of the cash incentive, thus the cash reward did not affect the respondents' participation. All of the focus group participants were provided lunch, complements of the resort, as a token of their participation.

Focus Group Findings Report

From the audio tapes and the information on the flip charts, a verbatim report was developed (Appendix A). The audio tapes were transcribed by the researcher, which were used to write up the verbatim comments of the report. A descriptive executive summary was compiled, which was easy to read and follow in relations to the needs of the client, with the actual participants' responses (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). This report provided the data to identify The Service Performance Gap factors. The Gap 3 factors were present which are as presented in the literature review: Role Ambiguity, Role Conflict, Employee - Job Fit, Technology - Job Fit, Supervisory Control Systems, Perceived Control, and Teamwork.

Significance

Since the intent of a business is to identify and service customers, eliciting employee participation in this process is one of the primary attributes of the use of focus groups while providing information which can obtain Service Gap 3 factors. There are other benefits as well: lowering levels of distrust and between employee and management, enhancing innovation, complementing all marketing efforts, and increase awareness of guest service expectations. In this sense, then, all the information from the focus groups is significant.

The methodology used in this study was designed to prevent any judgments that of the researcher during the session. This would allow objective information to be gathered and reported from the information gathered during the session.

The information from the focus groups was presented to the general manager and all of the managers at the resort. The information provided management with a valuable tool to open communication in the resort, which in itself meet the purpose of the study.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The desire for an independent western New York resort to improve its service was through the gathering of employees opinions. This participative approach to problem solving provided general service information while identifying The Service Performance Gap factors as presented in the following results.

The focus groups for this project were held on July 12, 1994. The focus groups were held in a meeting room at the Lodge at Woodcliff. The room had a large conference table with two flip-charts. The audio recorders were located at each end of the conference table to ensure accurate recordings.

The first group consisted of nine participants; five from the Food and Beverage department, two from Housekeeping, one from Security, and one from the Front Office. The second group consisted of seven participants; three from the Food and Beverage department, two from the Bellstaff, one from the Front Office, and one from Engineering.

A question and answer format provides the actual comments of the focus group participants. The responses to the questions are what, specifically, the focus group participants said, which are transcriptions of the audio tapes.

A general summary and the identification of Gap 3 factors were developed from the participants responses.

Results

General Question 1

When you think of customer service, what comes to mind?

All of the participants value the importance of customer service, the resort's success and their jobs:

- "Service that will make the customer want to come back happy."
- "It's getting the right treatment from all the people at the hotel."
- "Finding a different alternative, figuring out how to do it, take any job that is asked of you even if it's not their job."
- "Service underlined a thousand times, the customer coming first, when they want something, give it to them."
- "Quick, prompt, friendly service."
- "Without the customer, we would not be here, to make them happy-willing to do anything without sacrificing the overall customer service."
- "Going out of your way to meet their needs, make the service a little better."
- "Consistency."
- "Comfortable."

General Question 2

As an employee of Woodcliff, what is your perception of the overall quality of service?

There is a wide range of answers to this question, from high to low scale. There needs to be improvements in relation to operations effect on the level of service:

- "Could be greatly improved."
- "From the customer's point of view, good, from my view- it could improve."
- "Guests are impressed"
- "Provides a good level of service, I've seen less hotels give better levels of service."
- "Depends on the money coming into the hotel on the quality of service that can be provided."
- "I would rate it an 8."
- "Too many people leave, it hinders the service that new employees can provide to the guest."
- "It fluctuates."
- "Service is fine, do an excellent job, you're going to find exceptions."

Teamwork Question

How could you improve the service to the customers?

The answers to this question emphasize training, departmental organization and teamwork. Communication, efficiency, standardization and quality service can improve service.

Service Gap 3 factors identified Teamwork as a needed action to improve service. The factors of Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict were also derived from the data.

- "Cross-training. I do not know what goes on in other areas, its a different level of service, I don't know how to provide that level of service if asked."

- "Jobs can be done more efficiently, get the one's who aren't doing anything in other departments to help out."
- "Rooms could be cleaner, There's stuff under the beds, not dusted."
- "Better communication, coordination between departments."
- "Work as a team, restaurant is probably better than any other department. most nights."
- "I've been more comfortable with the quality of food, makes it easier for a server to do the job."
- "A lot of things are rushed, half-patched- a lot unforeseen problems (Facility)-quality of hotel makes it hard for me to do my job."
- "How we get to the end result is a little hectic."
- "Communication in the hotel is high, but it doesn't get committed."
- "Training before you start your job."
- "More education on quality service."

Role Conflict Question

Does the service that is expected of you to deliver , match that of the service demanded by the customer?

A large percentage of employees believe they are meeting customer's expectations, while other are unsure of the service they are delivering. There is a question in the staffing as it pertains to matching the desired service level.

Role Conflict was identified from the data along with Perceived Control as needed in order to service customers.

- "I would say so."
- "It could depend on the customer, they may be a little anal retentive, but that is what they want and that is their choice."

- "Most of the time we meet it, you wonder why they come back, because you think that they didn't like anything, but they leave say it was fine and come back"
- "We meet what they want, some people will never be happy."
- "Majority of people are happy, people(employees) are motivated to do a good job."
- "Some people's request cannot be satisfied."
- "Unfortunately this hotel has a lot of money going out, cannot repair all things when it is needed."
- "Staffing sometimes do not match demand, that's not the employees fault."

Role Ambiguity and Superior Control System Question

What do you feel is management's role in reinforcing the customer service philosophy at Woodcliff?

Training , participative management, hiring the right people and employee meetings have been suggested. Inter/intra departmental communication, organization, participation and overall customer service issues need to be addressed.

The service Gap 3 factors Role Ambiguity and Supervisory Control Systems are prevalent in the data along with suggestions of an improved Employee-Job fit and Perceived Control to improve customer service.

- "Proper training."
- "Communication among departments, it lacks."
- "More selective on who they hire."

- "Staff development training manuals for each department, then management acts it out."
- "Management should make sure everyone in their department knows about other departments."
- "Managers need to see the various demands of service at different times of the day."
- "Participative managers, helps in team atmosphere."
- "Information from managers meeting conveyed to employees."
- "Offer incentives to keep quality employees, to maintain quality service."
- "Reduce turnover."
- "Give employees more power."
- "Management should encourage suggestions, communication."
- "Managers should not say "its not my job," the employees will keep the same attitude."
- "Sales staff is too far removed from providing customer service to employees, there here to serve guests too."
- "More meetings with staff, not just to correct problems, to inform. We are never asked for our suggestions, how can it be improved?"
- "Training, basic training for the job task- for the managers to get the new people going-to give them a sense of urgency- managers should get them up to a workable speed and check up on them."
- "Training is variable in the same department."
- "People really need to know what their job is."
- "We do have an orientation program, which is great."
- "Front desk needs to be trained on how to handle complaints-they hear all the complaints from everywhere and everyone."

- "They (managers) say they want to do things but it does not get carried out."
- "The jobs are not standardized, everyone does things differently. Poor time management, managers have so much things to do."
- "Do not need a complaint for a meeting."

Perceived Control and Teamwork Questions

Having read the "ideal service scenario," is this the ideal service?

The employees on a whole believe that they are delivering the ideal service to the guest, with some exceptions. They value the basic service but believe that more should be expected of them to provide.

The employees perceive that they are meeting the customer's service requirements, thus overcoming the gap factor, Role Conflict.

- "Its great but not ideal, too clean cut. Employees add the personal touch."
- "The scenario is broad and basic. This is what they expect but we give them what they want and more."
- "This may be the ideal service, but it is not always that way."
- "It's a little cut and dry, not personal, basic, extra stuff makes the service what it is here."
- "Most people who work here remember the guest, it brings them back, it makes them feel comfortable."
- "The second paragraph is false, there are not bellhops."
- "Can't find the place (hotel)-sign's not visible from 96. We need a Woodcliff Drive sign on the stop light."
- "This (service) is expected, an employee needs to give more (service) than this scenario."

- "If they don't receive this ideal service, its the guest's fault. We deliver this with some exceptions."

What would help you deliver the ideal service?

This answers go back to the supportive role management can play in customer service. Management's commitment to employee retention, teamwork and behavior need to be addressed. However, some comments were made of what they can do as individuals.

Perceived Control and Teamwork factors are suggested with the reoccurrence of Role Ambiguity and Employee-Job Fit factors.

- "Smile more."
- "Whenever I see a guest looking for something, ask them if they need help and bring them to where they need to go. Just don't tell them."
- "The front desk should tell guests that the ice box is on the second floor."
- "An outline to employees, right when they start their job so they know what to do and where to find things."
- "Role-playing, so employees know how it is to be a customer here and a server at the same time."
- "Teamwork."
- "Hiring and keeping quality people."
- "Have fellow employees who are able to absorb what is needed to be done."
- "Not a lot of customers behavior to the guest."
- "Personality training."
- "Things that are problems to the guest affect all areas and comments, communicate that to different departments."

- "Its not a steady thing (training), everyone is trained differently, things change all the time(what their suppose to do), how they (managers) want the customers treated."
- "They (managers) do not set aside time to train new people."
- "Some guest don't understand what we can do for them."

Role Conflict Question

Where do you think you are at delivering the ideal service?

Employees state that they are or almost delivering the "ideal" service to the guest, thus narrowing the Role Conflict factor at this property.. The view that this resort is perceived as a leader in the market is held by the employees.

- "High. We have a family atmosphere here."
- "Well above an eight."
- "We are one of the best in Rochester."
- "Nine out of ten people get this service."

Perceived Control Question

What do you think is needed that would help you deliver the ideal service to the customer?

Opinions pertaining to guest information/handling were suggested, so to be more apt in knowing how to please the customer. Continual service delivery training and reminders along with information would help to deliver and ideal service to the guest.

The Perceived Control service gap factor is present along with reinforcements of the Role Ambiguity and Supervisory Control Systems.

- "Explain to guest if there is a problem with any facility here before the guest comes in, so they do not come in and leave angry."
- "Preventative maintenance."
- "We get strange requests and we don't know how to handle them, what to say."
- "We need to renovate the guest rooms, they are worn."
- "Do not know the objectives of the hotel."
- "Inconsistency in service training."
- "The hotel can pick up employee morale, they shoot all the suggestions down. There needs to be hotel events to bring employees together."
- "Not enough reminders that even though we have done this job a lot, this is the first time for the customer."
- "Too much focus on the task at hand, and not service."
- "Need to write down what they (new employees) are suppose to do."
- "Continue to actively seek customer opinions."
- "More explanations with special events."
- "Encourage managers to listen to both employees and customers."
- "Communication with the kitchen before we start working with customers so we can then tell them if we could do something for them or not."
- "Training manuals."
- "We need information on the property, facilities."

Role Conflict Question

What would be an example of the ideal service that is demanded by the customer, but is not being addressed?

Comments ranged from every department and various aspects within the hotel, such as updated amenities packages, departmental meetings, and outsourced service information.

The employees perceive that there is evidence of Role Conflict from the data. Other factors represented include Technology-Job Fit and Role Conflicts, which is suggested as needed to deliver customer service.

- "Bell staff more visible, have a bell captain."
- "Update the amenities, sell more in the sports center."
- "More irons and boards, have more than enough, not not enough."
- "Smokers do not have enough places to smoke, it needs to be addressed in another way."
- "Not enough training for bell staff, its the easiest job, least pay and most important for the guest to see that person when they pull up."
- "Suggestions turned down- why wasn't it addressed to the employees."
- "Pre-work meetings to know what's going on and what we have and don't have to offer the guest."
- "Families do not voice their concerns as well as business people."
- "We need to have audio-visual briefings."
- "Front desk manager has a lot of work-too much."

Supervisory Control Systems Question

What would make you feel comfortable in performing your jobs?

Knowledge about the employee's purpose and job were strongly emphasized throughout this discussion, along with positive reinforcement, employee recognition, and goal of resort as it pertains to customer service.

The employees have identified a need for a increase in a Supervisory Control System to ensure the delivery of quality service, including the flexibility of their Perceived Control of that service.

- "Acknowledgment and recognition of how and to what they do."
- "Managers who know what and how to do things."
- "Positive reinforcement from managers, we get it from fellow employees."
- "Knowing how far your employee empowerment will go."
- "Easygoing people, comfortable to work with."
- "I would like to see a mission statement, goals and objectives."
- "People enjoy their jobs here, it would be nice to know that they have a career and future here."
- "A thank you goes a long way."
- "Some guest don't understand what we can do for them, some training on how to tell the guest what we can do for them."

Findings

The use of employee focus groups provide a valuable communicative tool to gather Service Gap 3 factors from employees. Employees are able to assess their job as well as the customer's perceptions of their jobs. This allows management and fellow employees the chance to inform and learn from others about the service that is provided or demanded by the customers.

The Service Gap 3 factor, Role Conflict, as discussed in Chapter II to be the biggest gap can be confirmed by the results of the data in this study. The Role Conflict factor was a reoccurring response by the participants. This confirms with SERVQUAL's finding, as it being the biggest gap within Gap 3.

The finding of this study conclude that the Gap 3 factors do exist at this resort. The identification of these service gap factors confirms that this resort need to take actions which can reduce the factors that do exist. Recommendations to lessen the Gap 3 factors are presented in Chapter V.

Employees at this property have identified the service gap factors that are hindering the optimal service performance to this resort's customers. The open-ended question format allows the participants to offer any information, while the moderator reinforces the question asked. Thus, specific information to gather specific service factors were identified, while identifying other service gap factors. If the factors identified in the data are addressed by management, the road to lessening The Service Performance Gap can commence.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The involvement of employees in focus groups for this project provided the researcher and client with a rich source of information on service which was presented to the management of the resort and used in this research. From this information, it can be assumed that management will address many of the issues presented here and they will be able to explore other issues in the future. The results of the data collected are concluded in the next chapter of this study.

This study describes how communication with internal customers can improve customer service, which was the purpose of this study. Employees provided significant information through the use of focus groups; in turn, the information provided valuable insights on how they could narrow Gap 3: The Service Delivery Gap.

Employees in this study understand their importance in the customer service delivery process. They provided information that could improve service, such as training and information, which would give them the knowledge and confidence to identify and to meet customer's expectations

and lessen the Role Conflict factor; From the SERVQUAL research, the largest factor in Gap 3..

This study demonstrates that employees are a rich resource of information to identify service gaps and are able to suggest how service delivery, work processes and management might be improved, supporting the principles of participative management presented in Chapter II. As a result of being included in the service management process, employees are more apt to commit to meeting business goals and ultimately to delivering service excellence.

This chapter is further broken down into the conclusions from the research data, recommendations from the researcher which can be used to lessen the service performance gap and finally study specific recommendation. This will provide a global perspective of this research and its various dimensions.

Conclusions

Through the use of focus groups, the forum for employees to communicate their opinions and perceptions on relationships that exist between employees, the external customer and management can be opened. It may be also prescribed to uncover employees' underlining perceptions of service and of management's role in supporting the customer service philosophy.

The problem of this study being that the management of this resort wanted to improve service through discovering what employee's opinions are on customer service; which this study has exposed those opinions. It also provided the information management needed to begin the improvement of the service delivery process.

The hypothesis of this study states employees cannot identify SERVQUAL's Service Performance Gap Factor of Role Conflict as the biggest gap. This hypothesis is rejected. The employees in this study did identify Role Conflict as the biggest Service Gap Factor. The emphasis on the employees role and ability to perform the level of service as requested by their customers has not been defined or communicated to the employees at this resort. The result being that the employees role is not clear and thus the hypothesis is rejected because the employees did identify this factor.

If customer service improvement is management's intent, employees must be included in the process. Various top-down and bottom-up management theories might be explored as a business addresses the broad issue of improving customer service. The emphasis on the end-result may confuse a business who may be looking to improve customer service, which may not register an immediate bottom-line result; but the road to improvement may occur more substantively- through the training process, where the results may not yield to increased effort. The road to improvement may be the actual learning medium which this study has continued the journey by identifying the Gap 3 service factors. The real test will be the process that is taken to ensure the consistency in customer service and its

growth into a continual service delivery improvement process, which the customer will then be able to assess its actual success.

Recommendations

Recommendations on narrowing the service Gap 3 factors described in Chapter IV, may aid the resort in providing service that employees want to deliver. A study of customers perceptions may identify the existing gaps from the customers perspective. The researcher has provided some recommendations built on the focus group data:

The communication needed by the employees in this resort includes general resort information, job duties, events, and inter/ intra departmental information. There needs to be a feedback system on employee performance to lessen the Employee Role Ambiguity factor to perform as expected by management and also the customers.

Employee confidence and competence can be enhanced through training. The employees have suggested basic, formal, and special training for such areas as complaint management.

The role conflict factor can be minimized once the employees role is explained and developed there will be an consistency level as to how they are expected to perform in their jobs. The employees in this study do believe that they are providing the service that is requested by the customer, however, there are contradictory comments that should be examined in a future study.

The minimizing of the Poor Employee-Job Fit at the resort requires an improvement in the selection of employees can be developed through the development of a human resource person. That person would be able to select, hire, and train employees as to the level of service that is expected at this property.

In relation to the Technology -Job Fit factor, the technology or lack of equipment in this resort relates to such things as ironing boards, amenities and audio-visual problems. Decreasing employee turnover would keep employees at the property who are knowledgeable of the equipment.

The level of service that a guest receives depends on the level of performance to deliver that service to the guest. At this property, there is no performance measurement or reward recognition system which can aid in narrowing the Supervisory Control Systems factor. If the system includes a simple "thank you," as seen in the data, this would be in the right direction to recognizing the employees work and their contribution to the service at the property.

The employees need to have the information, skills and flexibility to decreasing the Perceived Control factor. Without the confidence in their job which information provides, the delivery of service will not be as timely in demand situations, such as high peak times.

The role of teamwork in a service setting reinforce the idea of "service," the serving of others. That does not always mean just customers

but everyone that is in need of help. This basic principle would allow this property to lessen the Teamwork factor as it presently exist.

This study recommendations provide a starting point in addressing these Gap 3 factors, which will decrease The Service Performance Gap. The understanding of customer's perception would provide the management of this property with an reinforcement to the data presented in this study. The data presented in Chapter IV has traces of other Service Gaps, which should be examined in a future study.

The focus group methodology did provide a wealth of information on employees perception of customer service relationships in this study. From the proposal to the actual research, some issues had to be adapted. The inclusion of identifying specific work process improvements from the employees, in the focus group, was unobtainable within the constraints of time and the research method. Thus, the exploration into this area was omitted. Further research can explore these issues in greater detail.

In the quest to define work processes and a move towards improvements, can be attained through structured interviews in the future. This would allow a researcher time and focus on the specific goal at hand, to fully explore the work process and possible means for improvements. Employee surveys could also be used in evaluating the employees perception's of service/management improvement.

Quantitative studies should be conducted to make clear the generalizability of the focus group data. These data would provide a stronger decision base for management.

To determine the perceptions and opinions of the external customer, focus groups can be used to gather this information. A comparison study can be conducted, utilizing the results of the two studies to measure the results of perceptions and possible service gaps.

In conducting future focus group at this resort, a more distributive sample population would be requested. For example, there were no employees from the sports facility and golf course.

The use of employee focus groups in a resort setting has proven to be successful as an information gathering instrument. It offers flexibility in answering questions and generating ideas. The information gathering process of the focus groups was the responsibility of the researcher, while the use of the focus group results will be left to management's discretion. The first step in the improvement process begins with employees and with the proper attention, should result in an improvement in customer service.

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APPENDIX A
FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS REPORT

Employees and Customer Service

The Lodge at Woodcliff

Focus Group Findings

Presented By: Louis J. Gagliano
Rochester Institute of Technology
July 20, 1994

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two two-hour focus group sessions were held on July 12, 1994 to gather information on employee perceptions of customer service. The opportunity to gather this information was feasible through the generosity of Peter McCrossen, management and especially the employees who offered their time to participate in the sessions.

Employees provided information on the present customer service level that exist and the "ideal" service feasible at the resort. Opinions on management's role in reinforcing the customer service philosophy were explored. The employees did not only offer criticisms to the present service level but they also provided suggestions of how to improve the service to the customers of The Lodge at Woodcliff, emphasizing the role that employees can play in providing information pertaining to customer service.

II. FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Question

When you think of customer service, what comes to mind?

All of the participants value the importance of customer service, the resort's success and their jobs:

- "Service that will make the customer want to come back happy."
- "It's getting the right treatment from all the people at the hotel."
- "Finding a different alternative, figuring out how to do it, take any job that is asked of you even if it's not their job."
- "Service underlined a thousand times, the customer coming first, when they want something, give it to them."
- "Quick, prompt, friendly service."
- "Without the customer, we would not be here, to make them happy-willing to do anything without sacrificing the overall customer service."
- "Going out of your way to meet their needs, make the service a little better."
- "Consistency."
- "Comfortable."

Question

As an employee of Woodcliff, what is your perception of the overall quality of service?

There is a wide range of answers to this question, from high to low:

- "Could be greatly improved."

- "From the customer's point of view, good, from my view- it could improve."
- "Guests are impressed"
- "Provides a good level of service, I've seen less hotels give better levels of service."
- "Depends on the money coming into the hotel on the quality of service that can be provided."
- "I would rate it an 8."
- "Too many people leave, it hinders the service that new employees can provide to the guest."
- "It fluctuates."
- "Service is fine, do an excellent job, you're going to find exceptions."

Question

How could you improve the service to the customers?

The answers to this question emphasize training, departmental organization and teamwork:

- "Cross-training. I do not know what goes on in other areas, its a different level of service, I don't know how to provide that level of service if asked."
- "Jobs can be done more efficiently, get the one's who aren't doing anything in other departments to help out."
- "Rooms could be cleaner, There's stuff under the beds, not dusted."
- "Better communication, coordination between departments."
- "Work as a team, restaurant is probably better than any other department. most nights."

- "I've been more comfortable with the quality of food, makes it easier for a server to do the job."
- "A lot of things are rushed, half-patched- a lot unforeseen problems (Facility)-quality of hotel makes it hard for me to do my job."
- "How we get to the end result is a little hectic."
- "Communication in the hotel is high, but it doesn't get committed."
- "Training before you start your job."
- "More education on quality service."

Question

Does the service that is expected of you to deliver , match that of the service demanded by the customer?

A large percentage of employees believe they are meeting customer's expectations:

- "I would say so."
- "It could depend on the customer, they may be a little anal retentive, but that is what they want and that is their choice."
- "Most of the time we meet it, you wonder why they come back, because you think that they didn't like anything, but they leave say it was fine and come back"
- "We meet what they want, some people will never be happy."
- "Majority of people are happy, people(employees) are motivated to do a good job."
- "Some people's request cannot be satisfied."
- "Unfortunately this hotel has a lot of money going out, cannot repair all things when it is needed."

- "Staffing sometimes do not match demand, that's not the employees fault."

Question

What do you feel is management's role in reinforcing the customer service philosophy at Woodcliff?

Training , participative management, hiring the right people and employee meetings have been suggested:

- "Proper training."
- "Communication among departments, it lacks."
- "More selective on who they hire."
- "Staff development training manuals for each department, then management acts it out."
- "Management should make sure everyone in their department knows about other departments."
- "Managers need to see the various demands of service at different times of the day."
- "Participative managers, helps in team atmosphere."
- "Information from managers meeting conveyed to employees."
- "Offer incentives to keep quality employees, to maintain quality service."
- "Reduce turnover."
- "Give employees more power."
- "Management should encourage suggestions, communication."
- "Managers should not say "its not my job," the employees will keep the same attitude."

- "Sales staff is too far removed from providing customer service to employees, there here to serve guests too."
- "More meetings with staff, not just to correct problems, to inform. We are never asked for our suggestions, how can it be improved?"
- "Training, basic training for the job task- for the managers to get the new people going-to give them a sense of urgency- managers should get them up to a workable speed and check up on them."
- "Training is variable in the same department."
- "People really need to know what their job is."
- "We do have an orientation program, which is great."
- "Front desk needs to be trained on how to handle complaints-they hear all the complaints from everywhere and everyone."
- "They (managers) say they want to do things but it does not get carried out."
- "The jobs are not standardized, everyone does things differently. Poor time management, managers have so much things to do."
- "Do not need a complaint for a meeting."

Question

Having read the "ideal service scenario," is this the ideal service?

The employees on a whole believe that they are delivering the ideal service to the guest, with some exceptions:

- "Its great but not ideal, too clean cut. Employees add the personal touch."
- "The scenario is broad and basic. This is what they expect but we give them what they want and more."
- "This may be the ideal service, but it is not always that way."

- "It's a little cut and dry, not personal, basic, extra stuff makes the service what it is here."
- "Most people who work here remember the guest, it brings them back, it makes them feel comfortable."
- "The second paragraph is false, there are not bellhops."
- "Can't find the place (hotel)-sign's not visible from 96. We need a Woodcliff Drive sign on the stop light."
- "This (service) is expected, an employee needs to give more (service) than this scenario."
- "If they don't receive this ideal service, its the guest's fault. We deliver this with some exceptions."

Question

What would help you deliver the ideal service?

This answers go back to the supportive role management can play in customer service. However, some comments were made of what they can do as individuals:

- "Smile more."
- "Whenever I see a guest looking for something, ask them if they need help and bring them to where they need to go. Just don't tell them."
- "The front desk should tell guests that the ice box is on the second floor."
- "An outline to employees, right when they start their job so they know what to do and where to find things."
- "Role-playing, so employees know how it is to be a customer here and a server at the same time."
- "Teamwork."

- "Hiring and keeping quality people."
- "Have fellow employees who are able to absorb what is needed to be done."
- "Not a lot of customers behavior to the guest."
- "Personality training."
- "Things that are problems to the guest affect all areas and comments, communicate that to different departments."
- "Its not a steady thing (training), everyone is trained differently, things change all the time(what their suppose to do), how they (managers) want the customers treated."
- "They (managers) do not set aside time to train new people."
- "Some guest don't understand what we can do for them."

Question

Where do you think you are at delivering the ideal service?

Employees state that they are or almost delivering the "ideal" service to the guest:

- "High. We have a family atmosphere here."
- "Well above an eight."
- "We are one of the best in Rochester." --
- "Nine out of ten people get this service."

Question

What do you think is needed that would help you deliver the ideal service to the customer?

Opinions pertaining to guest information/handling were suggested, so to be more apt in knowing how to please the customer:

- "Explain to guest if there is a problem with any facility here before the guest comes in, so they do not come in and leave angry."
- "Preventative maintenance."
- "We get strange requests and we don't know how to handle them, what to say."
- "We need to renovate the guest rooms, they are worn."
- "Do not know the objectives of the hotel."
- "Inconsistency in service training."
- "The hotel can pick up employee morale, they shoot all the suggestions down. There needs to be hotel events to bring employees together."
- "Not enough reminders that even though we have done this job a lot, this is the first time for the customer."
- "Too much focus on the task at hand, and not service."
- "Need to write down what they (new employees) are suppose to do."
- "Continue to actively seek customer opinions."
- "More explanations with special events."
- "Encourage managers to listen to both employees and customers."
- "Communication with the kitchen before we start working with customers so we can then tell them if we could do something for them or not."
- "Training manuals."

- "We need information on the property, facilities."

Question

What would be an example of the ideal service that is demanded by the customer, but is not being addressed?

Comments ranged from every department and various aspects within the hotel:

- "Bell staff more visible, have a bell captain."
- "Update the amenities, sell more in the sports center."
- "More irons and boards, have more than enough, not not enough."
- "Smokers do not have enough places to smoke, it needs to be addressed in another way."
- "Not enough training for bell staff, its the easiest job, least pay and most important for the guest to see that person when they pull up."
- "Suggestions turned down- why wasn't it addressed to the employees."
- "Pre-work meetings to know what's going on and what we have and don't have to offer the guest."
- "Families do not voice their concerns as well as business people."
- "We need to have audio-visual briefings."
- "Front desk manager has a lot of work-too much."

Question

What would make you feel comfortable in performing your jobs?

Knowledge about the employee's purpose and job were strongly emphasized throughout this discussion, along with positive reinforcement:

- "Acknowledgment and recognition of how and to what they do."
- "Managers who know what and how to do things."
- "Positive reinforcement from managers, we get it from fellow employees."
- "Knowing how far your employee empowerment will go."
- "Easygoing people, comfortable to work with."
- "I would like to see a mission statement, goals and objectives."
- "People enjoy their jobs here, it would be nice to know that they have a career and future here."
- "A thank you goes a long way."
- "Some guest don't understand what we can do for them, some training on how to tell the guest what we can do for them."

III. CONCLUSIONS

The information provided in this report presents the possible information that employees can provide to any business about its service. Employees are able to assess their job and each customer's perception of that service. The forum to communicate employee perceptions is needed. This allows management and fellow employees the chance to inform and learn from others about the service that is provided or demanded by the customers.

The fact that employees are asked to be a part of a focus group may prove to be a motivational tool in itself. This may then carry over to employee productivity by reinforcing their importance in rendering the expected levels of customer service to each individual guest. The combination of the information from the focus groups and employee perception of their effort, may prove to be a beneficial continual quality process to operations, employee moral and customer service if acted upon.

THE LODGE AT WOODCLIFF

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Date: _____ Start Time: _____ End Time: _____

Hello, everyone. My name is Louis Gagliano and this is my colleague, _____. Thank you all very much for making time to be with us today. Our discussion will be informal, so feel free to relax and ask any questions or make any comments you would like. Would you please read the following "RELEASE FORM," sign and date it and pass it to me. Before we begin, I would like to restate the objectives of this session. This focus group will gather information on what you think you can do to improve customer service by looking at the work that you do and to gather information on your perceptions of that service. I would like to lay down some ground rules that may help to improve the effectiveness of this session. The information that you will be providing to me will be confidential as to who said what, no names will be revealed as for the report I will provide to management. Do speak up and let's try to have just one person speak at a time, but do not feel that you cannot question another person's answer after they have finished speaking. Please say exactly what you think. Don't worry about what I think or what your neighbors think. I may interrupt you if I find that we are getting "off-track" with our train of thought, since time is limited. I would like to start by asking some general questions.

The Lodge at WoodCliff *Focus Group Questions*

1. Can everyone please introduce themselves, state your job position, how long you have been here and explain what you do here?
2. When you think of customer service, what comes to mind? Who are your customers?
3. As an employee of Woodcliff, what is your perception of the overall quality of service?

4. Does the service that is expected of you to deliver, match that of the service demanded by the customer?
5. What do you feel is management's role of reinforcing the customer service philosophy at Woodcliff?
6. Having read the "ideal Service Scenario," is this the "ideal" service? What suggestions do you have that will help you deliver the "ideal" service to the customers here at Woodcliff?
7. Where do you think you are now at delivering the "ideal" service to the guest?
8. What do you think is needed that would help you deliver the ideal service to the customer? What would make you a better service agent at Woodcliff?
9. What would be an example of the ideal service that is demanded by the customer, but is not being addressed?
10. What would make you feel more comfortable in performing your jobs?

The "Ideal" Customer Service Scenario

You are the guest. You call for a reservation at Woodcliff. The telephone is answered in a timely manner (less than three rings). The call is not transferred. The delivery of the job to gather and deliver information is professional and accurate. The spelling of your name is correct, the rate is quoted, recorded and accurate. Any anticipated needs you have are requested, recorded and given to the appropriate department. Any type of information including driving directions is provided and sent to you.

As you drive up to the entrance to Woodcliff Drive, you see a well lit sign and a well manicured lawn that is litter free.

As you pull up to the front of the hotel, you see a properly attired bell/door person with good posture awaiting their arrival. The bell person makes good eye contact, smiles, and welcomes you to the hotel. You are asked if you would like your car valet parked. Your bags are taken out of your car/van and carried to the front desk.

You are properly greeted by the front desk person. Your information, requests and rate are accurate. You are given any requested information, services, directions and community information. You are wished a pleasant stay and there is a bell person who takes your bags up to your room.

You enter the room to have your garment bags hung in the closet, and your luggage is placed on the luggage holder by the bell person. The curtains

are opened, lights on and the room temperature is adjusted if needed. You see a well kept room, free of stains, nicks or scratches. The instruments in the room are explained to you, i.e. television, air conditioning, etc. You are wished a pleasant stay.

Throughout your stay when you come in contact with any employee of Woodcliff, they have good eye-contact, in uniform and are addressed properly. Any call or request is answered properly. At the end of the wake-up call request, you are wished a good night.

At check out, your bags are brought down to the lobby by a bell person. Any questions about your stay or bill are answered quickly. You are wished a pleasant trip. Your car is brought to the main entrance, bags placed in the trunk and you are again wished a pleasant trip.

RELEASE FORM

I understand that the focus group in which I am participating is being audio taped. I give permission to Louis Gagliano from Rochester Institute of Technology's School of Food, Hotel and Travel Management to use my voice for research purposes. I understand that I shall not be identified by name in any report and that this audio tape will not be used for any other purpose and will be erased within three weeks.

Signed_____

Date_____